



The Success of Open Source

Steve WEBER

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Much of the innovative programming that powers the Internet, creates operating systems, and produces software is the result of "open source" code, that is, code that is freely distributed--as opposed to being kept secret--by those who write it. Leaving source code open has generated some of the most sophisticated developments in computer technology, including, most notably, Linux and Apache, which pose a significant challenge to Microsoft in the marketplace. As Steven Weber discusses, open source's success in a highly competitive industry has subverted many assumptions about how businesses are run, and how intellectual products are created and protected.

Traditionally, intellectual property law has allowed companies to control knowledge and has guarded the rights of the innovator, at the expense of industry-wide cooperation. In turn, engineers of new software code are richly rewarded; but, as Weber shows, in spite of the conventional wisdom that innovation is driven by the promise of individual and corporate wealth, ensuring the free distribution of code among computer programmers can empower a more effective process for building intellectual products. In the case of Open Source, independent programmers--sometimes hundreds or thousands of them--make unpaid contributions to software that develops organically, through trial and error.

Weber argues that the success of open source is not a freakish exception to economic principles. The open source community is guided by standards, rules, decisionmaking procedures, and sanctioning mechanisms. Weber explains the political and economic dynamics of this mysterious but important market development.

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Reviews of this book:

In the world of open-source software, true believers can be a fervent bunch. Linux, for example, may act as a credo as well as an operating system. But there is much substance beyond zealotry, says Steven Weber, the

author of *The Success of Open Source*...An open-source operating system offers its source code up to be played with, extended, debugged, and otherwise tweaked in an orgy of user collaboration. The author traces the roots of that ethos and process in the early years of computers...He also analyzes the interface between open source and the worlds of business and law, as well as wider issues in the clash between hierarchical structures and networks, a subject with relevance beyond the software industry to the war on terrorism.

--Nina C. Ayoub, Chronicle of Higher Education

Reviews of this book:

A valuable new account of the [open-source software] movement.

--Edward Rothstein, New York Times

We can blindly continue to develop, reward, protect, and organize around knowledge assets on the comfortable assumption that their traditional property rights remain inviolate. Or we can listen to Steven Weber and begin to make our peace with the uncomfortable fact that the very foundations of our familiar "knowledge as property" world have irrevocably shifted.

--Alan Kantrow, Chief Knowledge Officer, Monitor Group

Ever since the invention of agriculture, human beings have had only three social-engineering tools for organizing any large-scale division of labor: markets (and the carrots of material benefits they offer), hierarchies (and the sticks of punishment they impose), and charisma (and the promises of rapture they offer). Now there is the possibility of a fourth mode of effective social organization--one that we perhaps see in embryo in the creation and maintenance of...

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